

The Generic Structure of Chinese MA Students' Thesis Acknowledgments: A Comparative Study across Contexts

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Abstract: In the past two decades, the generic structures of acknowledgments in theses and dissertations have been studied in various contexts (Giannoni 2002; Hyland 2004; Al-Ali 2010; Yang 2012; Jalilifar–Mohammad 2014), and it has been revealed that the genre of acknowledgments has been shaped by the influence of disciplinary, social, cultural and contextual variables. However, there is relatively little literature on the cross-context analysis. On the basis of Hyland's (2004) move model, the present study involves the genre-based comparative analysis of 20 MA theses acknowledgments written by Chinese students, 10 of them studying for their degree in Chinese universities and the other 10 in American universities. Focusing on the generic structures and linguistic features of these acknowledgments, this study supports the idea that the Chinese students in the two contexts dominantly applied the obligatory thanking move and optional reflecting move, without the announcing move. However, the slight divergences occurring in the construction of moves/step, choices of acknowledgees and expressions of gratitude could possibly be explained by contextual factors including academic conventions and contextual values.

1 Introduction

Since the 1980s, the increasing application of genre theory to language research has established genre analysis as a special field in applied linguistics, and numerous publications on genre analysis have appeared in the academic domain. Under the influence of Swales' (1990) pioneering work on the CARS (Create A Research Space) model proposed for the analysis of the introductions of research articles, the macro-structure of various academic genres has been studied in the field of English for Academic purposes (EAP), including abstracts, introductions, discussions, results, conclusions, research paper titles etc. (Zhang–Jiang 2010). However, as to the genre of acknowledgments in the academic setting, scholars pay very little attention to it although it is of great scholarly importance in academic writing with a high frequency of appearance (Hyland 2003).

Described by Hyland (2003: 243) as a “Cinderella genre”, which is neither strictly academic nor entirely personal, the genre of acknowledgments in theses and dissertations is more than a simple list of acknowledgees who deserve gratitude; it

plays a crucial role in creating “both a professional and personal identity” and “affirming [the writer’s] commitment to values such as modesty, generosity, and gratitude which are prized by academic communities” (Hyland 2003: 264). For non-native English writers, it can be really difficult to express their gratitude adequately and appropriately in their theses and dissertations. According to Wen’s (2004) study, the two most common problems affecting Chinese students’ acknowledgments in theses and dissertations are: 1) over-general and abstract acknowledgments which lack explicit descriptions of assistance received; 2) wholly plagiarized or barely modified acknowledgments taken from other people’s work, which might cause acknowledgees’ dissatisfaction. Besides, there is an increasing number of Chinese students studying abroad in order to acquire academic degrees, who are challenged by language proficiency and cultural and contextual differences when composing their theses and dissertations in English. Based on Cheng’s (2012) research, a number of issues with considerable sociopragmatic relevance could be listed, including the following: how students in various cultural and social contexts express their gratitude, and how socio-cultural factors such as cultural differences, academic conventions and the use of English as an L1 or ESL or EFL in language contexts might affect the generic and linguistic features of acknowledgment writing.

So far the literature on the genre of acknowledgments in theses and dissertations has mainly focused on generic structure and the lexical-grammatical realization of acknowledgments written by one particular ethnic group in one social context by applying Hyland (2004)’s “three-tier model” (Hyland 2004; Hyland–Tse 2004; Al-Ali 2006, 2010; Lei 2006; Zhang–Jiang 2010). Other comparative studies from cross-cultural, cross-genre, or even cross-linguistic perspectives have also been conducted by researchers to compare acknowledgments in terms of their generic structures and linguistic features (Cheng 2012; Karakaş 2010; Kuhl–Rezaei 2014; Qin 2012; Mohammadi 2013; Jalilifar–Mohammadi 2014). However, there is still relatively little research involving the cross-contextual analysis of acknowledgments composed by writers who share similar cultural backgrounds but work in two different academic environments and language contexts. Consequently, three research questions will be explored in this present study:

- (1) What generic structure characterizes English thesis acknowledgements written by Chinese MA postgraduates studying in Chinese universities and American universities?
- (2) Are there any differences between Chinese MA students’ construction of moves and steps and choices of linguistic elements in the two different contexts?
- (3) If there are, what contextual factors influence students’ acknowledgement-writing habits?

On the basis of the research findings, possible pedagogical implications could be outlined to help Chinese students’ acknowledgements writing.

2 Theoretical background

The concept of genre was introduced to linguistics in the 1970s and since then many scholars and researchers have defined genre in different ways. Swales (1990) stated that genres comprise “a class of communicative events”, and that the members who take part in these events share the same communicative purposes. Taking into

consideration psychological and sociological factors, Bhatia (1993) further pointed out that being highly structured and conventionalized, genres are also constrained by the choice of certain lexis and moves, which are exploited by members of the discourse community, and that genres are connected with the organization of culture and social purposes around language. Genre analysis actually provides an explicit and systematic way to figure out how a particular genre is structured and distinguished in social and cultural contexts and finally achieves the goal of communicative purpose (Hyland 2004: 18).

Genre analysis can describe both linguistic features at a micro-level and generic structure at a macro-level to interpret how a particular genre is constructed and how its communicative purposes are realized through language uses. A great many studies on genre analysis at macro-level have been conducted to investigate moves and steps in academic discourses across different disciplines. The majority of the studies either adopted or modified the most influential CARS model, proposed by Swales (1999) to analyze research articles, to explore the move structure of various academic genres, including research paper titles, abstracts, introductions, discussions and conclusions (for example, Hyland 2000; Bunton 2002; Martin 2003; Swales 1990, 2004; Yang–Allison 2003, etc.). Micro-level genre analysis could emphasize linguistic features, such as tense and aspect, modality, adjectives and reporting verbs, in order to analyze the grammatical and stylistic aspects of particular genres (for instance, Vassileva 2001; Soler 2002; Flowerdew 2003, etc.).

Defined as a ‘Cinderella genre’ by Hyland (2003), as mentioned above, acknowledgements in academic settings have attracted the attention of some genre analysts. Giannoni (2002) first investigated acknowledgements by examining 100 samples in English and Italian research journals from six disciplines with reference to move structural pattern, to reveal how writers organize and express their gratitude. Two moves of acknowledgments were put forward: the *introductory move* (Framing) and the *main move* (Credit mapping). The greatest contribution to the generic study on acknowledgements was made by Hyland (2004), who investigated 240 MA and PhD theses and dissertations written by non-native English speaking students at Hong Kong universities. In order to explore how these non-native English writers express their gratitude in acknowledgment writing, he came up with a proposal for a three-tier structure, consisting of a main *Thanking move* framed by an optional *Reflecting move* and *Announcing move*, which has become a reference model for later similar research on acknowledgements in academic settings (Table 1). He also pointed out that moves and steps generally followed the same sequence, although there still might be many recursions of steps, especially of those expressing gratitude for academic and moral support. In a later study, Hyland and Tse (2004) further investigated the lexical-grammatical patterns that were employed to realize the component moves of the same acknowledgement samples. Hyland’s set of moves and steps can be summarized as follows:

Moves/steps	Description
1. Reflecting Move (optional)	Introspective comment on the writer's research experience
2. Thanking Move (obligatory)	Mapping credit to individuals and institutions
2.1 Presenting participants	Introducing those to be thanked
2.2 Thanking for academic assistance	Thanks for intellectual support, ideas, analyses, and feedback, etc.
2.3 Thanking for resources	Thanks for data access, clerical, technical and financial support
2.4 Thanking for moral support	Thanks for encouragement, friendship, sympathy, patience etc.
3. Announcing Move (optional)	Public statement of responsibility and inspiration
3.1 Accepting responsibility	An assertion of authorial responsibility for flaws and errors
3.2 Dedicating the thesis	A formal dedication of the thesis to one or more individuals

Table 1. Three-tier structure of acknowledgments (Hyland 2004)

Under the influence of Hyland (2004) and Hyland–Tse (2004)'s research, some of the existing literature on acknowledgements has focused on analyzing acknowledgements written by one particular ethnic group in one social context. In Arab settings, Al-Ali (2006, 2010) identified a new step, *Thanking Allah (God)*, by investigating 100 Arab PhD students' dissertation acknowledgements. By emphasizing the influence of religious beliefs and local academic and social conventions, he reached the conclusion that acknowledgements could reveal how writers perceive different selves in their interaction with their peers according to culture-specific preferred conventions. Some researchers have conducted cross-cultural studies by comparing acknowledgements in theses and dissertations written by native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) of English in two different social contexts. In Taiwan, Cheng (2012) compared 60 thesis acknowledgements written in English by Taiwanese and North American MA students and found that the two groups vary in the arrangement of addressees and the choice of thanking strategies for various addressees, reflecting different cultural perceptions of the expression of gratitude. In a Turkish context, Karakaş (2010) compared native speakers of Turkish and of American English to analyze the pragmatic and discourse strategies used in thesis acknowledgment writing and stressed that the social and cultural background of writers still affects the length of acknowledgments, language choices and move structures. Lasaky (2011) focused on non-native (Iranian) and native English speakers' thesis acknowledgements and identified a similar *Thanking Allah (God)* to the one found in Al-Ali's research, due to the similar context. He also explained the absence of the *Reflecting move* and the *Announcing move* in terms of cultural difference.

Other comparative studies have been conducted either by combining cross-cultural and cross-genre studies to compare acknowledgements in academic writing, including theses and dissertations, research articles and textbooks written by English native and

non-native (Iranian) speakers (Kuhi–Rezaei 2014), or by combining cross-cultural and cross-linguistic studies to compare acknowledgements in theses and dissertations written in English and other languages such as Chinese and Persian (Qin 2012; Mohammadi 2013; Jalilifar–Mohammadi 2014). Cross-contextual analysis has also attracted the attention of several researchers who paid particular attention to contextual factors. Zhang–Jiang (2010) compared the similarities and differences of generic structure, gratitude expressions and modifiers used in MA and PhD thesis acknowledgements by analyzing 40 acknowledgments written by Chinese speakers at Chinese universities, with reference to Hyland’s (2004) Hong Kong students’ model. Yang (2012) further compared thesis acknowledgements written by Mainland Chinese speakers, Hong Kong Chinese speakers and Taiwanese Chinese speakers and found that a similar three-tier structure was employed by writers in all three contexts, although some divergence appeared in move construction and language choices. Yang (2013) continued the cross-context genre analysis of thesis acknowledgements by focusing on Taiwanese authors in EFL and ESL contexts and found that academic conventions, institutional preferences and the language context, together with socio-cultural factors, affected their construction of moves/steps and their choice of linguistic elements.

In summary, a large number of existing studies have explored a single ethnic group’s thesis acknowledgements, and compared acknowledgment written by native speakers and non-native speakers, and cross-cultural, cross-contextual or even cross-genre analysis have been conducted in the studies discussed above to confirm the social and cultural factors that influence the move structure and linguistic realization of acknowledgements. However, there is still little research involving the comparative study of thesis acknowledgements written by writers who come from the same cultural background and speak the same mother language, but study in different contexts. Especially for Chinese-speaking students from mainland China who choose to study in American universities for MA or PhD degrees, writing theses and dissertations in English has been a huge challenge, and different contextual factors such as English status and academic conventions could influence their way of expressing their gratitude in academic writing. The present pilot study aims to explore the generic structure of Chinese MA students’ thesis acknowledgements by comparing move structure and linguistic choices across two contexts, namely Chinese universities and American universities, and analyzing the contextual factors that may affect or trigger cross-contextual variations. In order to be able to do so, the following research questions are addressed in this study: 1) What generic structure characterizes English theses acknowledgements written by Chinese MA students in Chinese and American universities? 2) Are there any differences between Chinese MA students’ construction of moves and steps and choices of linguistic elements in two contexts? 3) If there are, what contextual factors influence students’ acknowledgement writing habits?

3 Methods

In order to answer these research questions, a small corpus was built and genre analysis was applied to explore the generic structure of acknowledgements, acknowledgees and expressions of gratitude. A sample analysis is also provided in the Appendix as an example to help with possible replication.

3.1 Corpus

The pilot study uses a corpus consisting of 10 MA thesis acknowledgements written by Chinese postgraduates majoring in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics in Chinese universities, and 10 written by Chinese postgraduates majoring in Education and Applied Linguistics in American universities. Although it is a small corpus, 10 samples in each group can be regarded as sufficient for a pilot study. In order to make a reasonable comparison, very similar disciplines were selected between Chinese and American universities. All the theses were written by MA students majoring in English Applied Linguistics or TESOL. MA Theses written at Chinese universities were downloaded electronically from a Chinese dissertation databaseⁱ and MA theses written at American universities were downloaded electronically from the website of the University of Kansas.ⁱⁱ To ensure that the theses from the American university were written by Chinese mainland students, rather than Hong Kong or Taiwanese Chinese speakers, two strategies were adopted to confirm the writers' nationality: checking the name spelling, and reading the content of the abstracts and acknowledgements.

3.2 Procedures of analysis

Altogether 20 acknowledgements from Chinese universities (CU) and the American university (AU) were collected to establish two separate corpora and numbered CU001-010 and AU001-010. The generic structures of the two corpora were analyzed separately on the basis of Hyland (2004)'s model; another researcher was trained to co-code the sample and inter-coder agreement was checked to ensure the reliability of the analysis. 5 theses in each group were chosen at random and analyzed. The degree of agreement regarding moves reached 98.3% and regarding steps reached 86.5%. Based on the genre analysis, the generic structures of acknowledgements, mentions of acknowledgees and the frequency of expressions of gratitude were explored. A sample analysis of an acknowledgement which is included in the Appendix is intended to help demonstrate how the analysis was done by the coder in detail.

4 Data analysis and discussion

4.1 Generic structure

When the generic structure of 20 MA thesis acknowledgements was analyzed, the complexity of identification of certain steps immediately became apparent; as Zhang–Jiang (2010: 98) put it “the structures of different moves and steps seem to be vague and indefinite”. Some steps in the corpora seem to be integrated and overlapping. For example, when Chinese mainland students expressed their gratitude to their supervisors, both academic support and moral support were appreciated. Examples could be illustrated by samples from the two contexts.

ⁱ <http://www.cnki.net> Downloaded: 2017-10-07.

ⁱⁱ <http://kuscholarworks.ku.edu> Downloaded: 2017-10-07.

[1] First of all, I really would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor associate professor Zhang Zhenhong, for her great help and support, constant encouragement, enlightening advice, patient instruction and meticulous revision of this paper, without which the present paper could never have reached its present form. (CU-006)

Another example of the complexity of identifying the steps was that the same sentence might cover Step 2.2 and Step 2.3 of the thanking move, including gratitude to the supervisor for academic support and for help with data collection and analysis.

[2] I was very grateful to my instructor, Mr. Xu Haiming, who encouraged and guided me to write this thesis, gave me unremitting support during my data collection and data analysis phrases and valuable suggestions when I wrote and revised this paper. (AU-003)

A thorough analysis of the generic structures revealed that both the *Reflecting Move* and the *Thanking Move* identified in Hyland (2004)'s model were found in the two sample groups, but without *Move 3 Announcing Move*. The occurrence of moves and steps in both corpora is explicitly shown in Table 2 and Table 3. The most noticeable feature of the overall generic structure is the dominance of *Move 2 Thanking Move*, the obligatory move identified by Hyland (2004), with an occurrence of 100%. The other moves are far less frequent, with only 10% for the *Reflecting Move* and complete absence of the *Announcing Move*. As to the particular steps, it is clearly seen that M2 S2 *Thanking for academic support* and M2 S4 *Thanking for moral support* are the most common steps, occurring in every text, followed by M2 S1 *Presenting participants*, which occurs in 60% of cases in both sample groups and M2 S3 *Thanking for resources* (50% for CU and 60% for AU). Therefore, it may be concluded that Chinese MA students in both contexts are still unlikely to announce and dedicate their academic works. Possible reasons for this could be Chinese mainland students' over-emphasis of the modesty maxim of the politeness principle, under the influence of Confucian culture and the MA students' self-concept as novice researchers whose work cannot be regarded as accomplishments worthy of being dedicated to anyone (Zhang–Jiang 2010). Chinese MA students studying in the two contexts followed similar structural patterns of acknowledgements, and different academic conventions in American universities did not obviously affect Chinese students' avoidance of the announcing move.

Moves and Steps	CU		AU	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
M1 <i>Reflecting Move</i>	1	10%	1	10%
M2 <i>Thanking Move</i>				
S1 Presenting participants	6	60%	6	60%
S2 Thanking for academic assistance	10	100%	10	100%
S3 Thanking for resources	5	50%	6	60%
S4 Thanking for Moral support	10	100%	10	100%
M3 <i>Announcing Move</i>				
S1 Accepting responsibility	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
S2 Dedicating the thesis	0	0.0%	0	0.0%

Table 2. The frequency of acknowledgment with each step in the two corpora

Moves and Steps	CU	AU
M1 <i>Reflecting Move</i>	1 (1.8%)	1(1.7%)
M2 <i>Thanking Move</i>		
S1 Presenting participants	7 (12.7%)	6(10.3%)
S2 Thanking for academic assistance	25 (45.5%)	24 (41.4%)
S3 Thanking for resources	9 (16.4%)	12 (20.7%)
S4 Thanking for Moral support	13 (23.6%)	15 (25.9%)
M3 <i>Announcing Move</i>		
S1 Accepting responsibility	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
S2 Dedicating the thesis	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)

Table 3. The distribution of acknowledgment with moves and steps in the two corpora

Despite the similarities between the two groups, and the fact that both groups basically followed the same structures, there are still a number of differences. To begin with, even *Move 1 Reflecting Move* occurred in acknowledgements across the two contexts with quite low frequency. This might be explained by the possibility that compared with PhD students, Chinese MA students don't get used to reflecting their study journey due to shorter period of research.

Secondly, the occurrence (percentage) of *M2 S1 presenting the participants* in the CU corpus (12.7%) is slightly higher than in the AU corpus (10.3%). Chinese students in their own country seem to be more inclined to enumerate all the acknowledgees first and then get down to the details, which possibly conforms to the traditional English writing style - moving from general to specific - taught in their undergraduate courses. Thirdly, the percentages of *M2S3 thanking for resources* (20.7%) and *M2 S4 Thanking for moral support* (25.9%) are higher in the AU corpus than in the CU corpus, (16.4% and 23.6 % respectively). It could be assumed that Chinese mainland students who studied abroad at American universities have confronted more difficulties in collecting data and obtaining resources during their research and consequently received more assistance than those who studied in their home country. What is more, it is also quite natural that Chinese students studying at American universities suffer more from homesickness and similar hardships during their stay abroad, and require more moral and spiritual support from their family members, partners and friends.

Thirdly, the sequence of the moves also could reflect some differences between the two contexts. For example, it is also interesting to notice that *Move 1* serves as an opening move in the Chinese context (CU007), but appears at the end of the text in the American one (AU-002).

[3] During the three-year of postgraduate life, I have gained and experienced a lot, which cannot forget the people who sincerely help and boundlessly support me in my college life. (CU-007)

[4] The challenging while rewarding study experience in the department will always be part of me. (AU-002)

Another example is the flexible occurrence of *M2 S1 presenting participants* in both contexts. *M2 S1* could be used as the prologue to signal the purpose of this move – recognition of help from those involved in theses – or as the conclusion or summary of thanks to individuals and institutions already mentioned. Examples appear in Chinese students' writing in both American and Chinese universities.

[5] I would like to take this opportunity to show my great appreciation and gratitude to the following people for their selfless assistance and precious suggestions. (C-007, prologue)

[6] Lastly, I offer my regards and blessings to all of those who supported me in any respect during the completion of the research. (AU-008, conclusion)

It can be concluded that all of the Chinese postgraduates' MA acknowledgements across two different contexts generally followed Hyland's (2004) model, except for *Move 3 Announcing Move*. Academic conventions in different tertiary educational institutions and cultural factors in different settings might also have an effect on how generic structure is tailored to the different contexts.

3.2 Acknowledgees

How writers interact with the people acknowledged in thesis acknowledgements could be influenced by culture-specific conventions, according to Al-Ali (2010). Even though they share a similar cultural background, Chinese MA postgraduate students in two different contexts might exhibit differences when acknowledging people's assistance.

Acknowledgees	CU		AU	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Supervisor	10	100%	10	100%
Other teachers	8	80%	6	60%
School deans / administrators	1	10%	1	10%
Committee members	0	0%	5	50%
Research assistants	0	0%	1	10%
Participants in data collection	5	50%	3	30%
Family	10	100%	9	90%
Friends	4	40%	5	50%
Peers/ classmates	3	30%	1	10%
Colleagues	4	40%	1	10%
Writers published in the field	4	40%	0	0%

Table 4. The frequency of gratitude expressed toward different acknowledgees in the two corpora

Table 4 displays the distribution of the different categories of acknowledgees in the two different contexts. The most noticeable difference is that Chinese students in America thanked a broader range of people in their acknowledgements, such as committee members and research assistants, while Chinese students in their home country showed special appreciation to the writers of published works in the research fields. These divergences could be explained by the different contexts and academic conventions. Expressing gratitude to committee members in American universities is quite common because these professors have already contacted the writers and offered their assistance before the thesis defense. What is more, showing gratitude to those who have a direct influence on how the thesis might be received, such as committee members, could be a strategy intended to impress the committees and get theses accepted easily. However, academic conventions in Chinese universities differ sharply from those in America. The composition of MA thesis defense committees is supposed to remain confidential until the day of the defense, so there is no chance for Chinese students in China to find out who their committee members will be and express their gratitude in advance. At the same time, 40% of Chinese students in their home country universities expressed their gratitude to the authors of papers and books published in the related research field, which might show their respect for these figures in academic fields and ensure their academic identity as novice researchers.

3.3 Expressions of gratitude

Based on Hyland and Tse's (2004) analysis, expressions used to show gratitude in thanking moves and steps in acknowledgment can be categorized into five types: nominalisation (e.g. *My sincere thanks go to...*), performative verbs (e.g. *I thank...*), adjectives (e.g., *I am grateful to...*), passive voice (e.g. *Appreciation is given to...*) and bare mention (e.g. *X was very helpful in..., without...,*).

Gratitude expressions	CU		AU	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
nominalisation	37	53.6%	15	25.9%
performative verb	6	8.7%	28	48.3%
adjective	9	13.1%	8	13.8%
passive voice	3	4.3%	1	1.7%
bare mention	14	20.3%	6	10.3%
	69	100%	57	100%

Table 5. The frequency of gratitude expressions in the two corpora

There were some similarities and differences between the two groups of Chinese MA students, from Chinese and American universities. For instance, Chinese students in both contexts generally employed these expressions of gratitude, but the rank orders were quite different. Chinese students in American universities preferred to use “performative verb” patterns most often (48.3%) and “nominalisation” (24.1%), while Chinese students in China tended to use “nominalisation” (53.6%) and “bare mention” (20.3%). The higher frequency of “performative verbs” in the American context could possibly be explained in terms of the cultural and contextual effects. Under the influence of the American academic context, using verbs to express their gratitude in a more direct way could be the first choice for Chinese students. A similar finding was also reported by Qin (2009: 33), who pointed out that cultural difference influences the way in which writers express their gratitude. Directness was highly valued by western culture while indirectness was appreciated by Chinese students under the influence of Confucian culture. “Nominalisation” and “bare mention” could be regarded as more indirect expressions of gratitude and the more common use of these expressions suggests that Chinese students were more reserved when expressing their gratitude and emotions. Another possible cultural explanation for the low frequency of “passive tense” could be the characteristics of the Chinese language, in which the passive voice is always presented covertly, with the possible result that Chinese students are inclined to avoid the passive voice in their English acknowledgments (Zhang–Jiang 2010: 106). In summary, experience of studying in American universities, academic conventions and other contextual factors do affect the expression of gratitude, but the use of language in acknowledgments is still influenced by the writer’s cultural background and mother language, and the way in which these factors interact as they influence language use deserves further exploration.

4 Conclusion

This pilot study explored 20 MA theses in the field of English Applied Linguistics written by postgraduates from mainland China in Chinese universities and American universities and compared the generic structure and linguistic features across the two different contexts. It is concluded that even though the writers in the two corpora share the same cultural background and mother language, slight divergences still exist in the construction of moves and the linguistic realization of these moves. Chinese MA students in both contexts adopt the *Reflecting Move* and the *Thanking Move* in their academic writing, but eschew the *Announcing Move*, because they still hesitate to announce and dedicate their academic works in both contexts. However, slight differences also exist in Chinese students' acknowledgements between contexts. As to flexible positions of the move sequences, Move 1 *Reflection Move* and Move 2 Step 1 *Presenting participants* could occur at different locations in both contexts. Only Chinese students in American universities thanked committee members and research assistants, while only Chinese students in their home country expressed appreciation to the writers of published works in the research field. Students in the American context preferred to express gratitude in a direct way by using performative verbs while those in Chinese universities used more indirect ways to express their gratitude by using nominalisation and bare mention.

Cultural influence and mother language may be the factors influencing the generic features of Chinese postgraduates' acknowledgement writing, but many contextual factors such as academic conventions and contextualized values should be considered when analyzing these divergences. Possible pedagogical implications of the findings are that EAP teachers in China could offer training enhancing genre knowledge relating to acknowledgements and instruct students how to purposely and effectively express their gratitude by taking different contexts into consideration.

Additionally, more follow-up studies could be conducted. Further investigations on generic structure and linguistic features of acknowledgements could be carried out, using interviews to explore how and why Chinese postgraduate students construct moves and choose particular expressions in their acknowledgment writing. Besides the American context, or that of any other native English-speaking countries, countries belonging to the expanding circles could also be investigated to see whether these different contexts could bring similar influence to bear on acknowledgements written by Chinese MA students. In addition, similar comparative studies on MA students' thesis acknowledgements across contexts could also be extended to analyze non-native speakers of English from other countries. Yet another option would be to select PhD dissertations as samples.

Appendix

<p>Move 2 Thanking Move Step 1 Presenting participants Acknowledgees: (all the participants) Gratitude expressions: (Nominalisation: <i>gratitude</i>)</p>	<p>Acknowledgements</p> <p><i>I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the <u>many individuals</u> who have provided assistance and encouragement throughout my graduate work.</i></p>
<p>Step 2 Thanking for academic assistance Acknowledgees: (supervisor, committee members) Gratitude expressions: (Bare mention: <i>without the support of.....</i>) (Performative verb: <i>appreciate, acknowledge</i>) (Nominalisation: <i>gratitude</i>)</p>	<p>This thesis would not have been possible <i>without the support of my <u>advisor</u></i>, Dr. Mary Morningstar, who has willingly spent the amount of time providing me detailed feedback and wise advice about this study. <i>I deeply appreciate</i> her guidance, advice, and instruction over the past two years. <i>I also wish to acknowledge</i> Dr. Knowlton and Dr. Skritic who are <u>committee members</u> for whom <i>I would like to express my gratitude</i> for their thoughtful consideration and corrections.</p>
<p>Step 3 Thanking for resources Acknowledgees: (participants in data collection) Gratitude expressions: (Nominalisation: <i>thanks</i>)</p>	<p><i>A great deal of thanks also goes to 99 <u>doctoral students</u> who gave of their time to complete the survey.</i></p>
<p>Step 4 Thanking for moral support Acknowledgees: (family, especially the wife) Gratitude expressions: (Nominalisation: <i>gratitude</i>) (Performative verb: <i>appreciate</i>)</p>	<p>Finally, and most importantly, <i>I respectfully express my love and gratitude to <u>my family</u></i> who always trusted and encouraged me every step of the way through my master's program all the time. Especially, <i>my wife, I greatly appreciate</i> your special love and support from the bottom of my heart.</p>

Table 6. A sample analysis of acknowledgement

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